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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001588

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SUBJECT: LABOR MK SNEH TELLS SENATOR CORZINE ISRAEL CANNOT
ACCEPT NUCLEAR IRAN

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: Labor MK Ephraim Sneh told visiting Senator Jon Corzine and the Ambassador March 14 that he sees military action against Iran's nuclear program as only a last resort. Sneh advocated external support for popular efforts for regime change in Iran, but stressed that the change has to come from within Iran. Sneh said he was optimistic about developments between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but contended that Israel would view a strong Hamas showing in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections this July as problematic. Senator Corzine stressed the need for Israel to do all it can -- without compromising its security -- to ensure that PA President Abu Mazen succeeds. Sneh praised the Palestinian Authority for arresting terrorists and identifying explosives workshops, but stressed the difficulty the GOI faces in turning over control of areas in the West Bank and Gaza to the PA, as it requires the GOI to place trust in the PA and, perhaps, compromise Israel's security. End Summary.

Israel Cannot Tolerate Iran Threat

12. (C) Labor MK Ephraim Sneh highlighted to Senator Corzine and the Ambassador in a March 14 meeting what he characterized as the threat presented by a nuclear Iran. He stressed that Israel, as a Jewish state and with its history, cannot accept the combination of an "anti-Jewish state with huge military power." He underscored that Israel could not "tolerate" the Iranian situation as it stands, noting that "(Israel's) ability to negotiate with Arab states is compromised with this threat." Sneh assessed that Iran's missile range presently covers the "entire Gulf area" and that Iran is continuing to develop its enrichment capability. "We think it will be one-and-a-half years until (Iran) can produce (enriched) material without external support," Sneh assessed, and that it would take "another year and a half (to produce nuclear weapons.)" Ambassador Kurtzer pointed out that the GOI and USG have similar data, but that the GOI has assessed that Iran would become "independent" at an earlier date. Senator Corzine underlined that the situation with Iran is "very disconcerting" and that the USG would not "stand by when Israel is imperiled."

Encourage Regime Change in Iran

13. (C) Sneh dismissed as "stupid" and "baseless" claims in a March 13 article in The Sunday Times of London that the U.S. gave Israel a "green light" to take military action against Iran. Despite the threat that Iran presents, Sneh said, he is "not preaching for a preemptive strike." Sneh stressed that other options should be explored, such as "helping the Iranian people to change their regime." The Iranian people, in Sneh's view, are "thirsty for democracy" and should be encouraged. He underlined, however, that regime change in Iran should be at the hands of the Iranian people, not through outside military action. The USG, Sneh suggested, could encourage the Iranian people to initiate change by promising that a different regime would receive USG assistance.

14. (C) Sneh charged that the USG sent the wrong signal to the Iranian government by closing the Washington office of the Mujahadeen Khalq. Sneh contended that the group no longer merits inclusion on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations because, he said, it had committed no terrorist acts since killing Americans in the 1970s. The "easiest way" to send a strong signal to the Iranian government that the USG is serious about its demands would be to remove the terrorist designation from the Iranian opposition group and allow it to reopen its Washington offices. He said the group has strong popular backing in the U.S. and Europe, having brought 15,000 supporters to Washington for a demonstration. Sneh said that he raised this issue with then-Under Secretary Grossman when Sneh was last in Washington.

15. (C) Senator Corzine asked whether the GOI has any indications of other countries in the region developing nuclear capabilities. Sneh said the GOI has some "suspicions," but "no proof."

Worries About Hamas

16. (C) Sneh said that he is "optimistic" about the current dynamics between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), but expressed concern about a possible strong showing by Hamas in the July Palestinian Legislative Council elections. Senator Corzine stressed the importance of Israel "doing all it can" to help PA President Abu Mazen without compromising Israel's security. Sneh commented that discussions are ongoing within the Israeli "security apparatus" about how much control over Palestinian territory to give to the PA. The GOI is weighing the need to give the PA more security responsibility against the security risk, Sneh said. He commended the PA for detaining terrorists and discovering explosives workshops, cooperation, he noted, that has not been publicized.

17. (U) Senator Corzine did not have an opportunity to clear this message before leaving the country.

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KURTZER